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SUBJECT: IRF AMBASSADOR AT LARGE HANFORD MEETS WITH GVN  
SECURITY OFFICIAL

Reftels: A) 03 Hanoi 2897; B) Hanoi 353

1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford met March 6 with Vice Minister for Public Security Nguyen Van Huong. Huong objected to the designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and said many in the GVN were asking why they should cooperate with the USG on such issues as MIA recovery activities when they are criticized on religion. Huong said he expects all the churches in the Central Highlands that have been closed will be allowed to open, expanded opportunities for religious training and the release of all religious prisoners "after one year." Huong alleged that U.S. diplomats hold "secret meetings" with political activists and had encouraged Buddhist leader Thich Quang Do to test the restrictions placed upon him. Ambassador Marine responded that diplomats regularly and openly meet with political activists but only to gather information. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Accompanied by the Ambassador, DRL/IRF officer Matthew Schmolesky and Poloff, Ambassador Hanford began his March 6 meeting with Deputy Minister for Public Security Nguyen Van Huong by noting that many of the assurances on improvements in religious freedom that Huong had made during their previous meeting in October 2003 have been actualized (Ref. A). Ambassador Hanford stated "I have a specific purpose for this visit at this time," and referred to his negotiations with the MFA. Vietnam has taken a number of positive steps regarding religious freedom, and the USG wants to find a way to resolve the CPC issue that does not limit this momentum. It is also important to set a positive atmosphere for the expected visits of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to Washington this summer and of President Bush to the APEC meeting in Hanoi in the fall of 2006. One of the USG's major concerns regarding religious freedom is that the policies promulgated in Hanoi are not always enacted in practice at the local level. The USG also has concerns about certain prisoners in Vietnam, some of whom have been incarcerated for many years. Ambassador Hanford also covered ongoing concerns about the closure of churches, forced renunciations of faith, the continued detentions of religious prisoners, and the physical abuse of religious believers. He specifically raised the case of imprisoned Mennonite Le Thi Hong Lien, and asked she be released on humanitarian grounds.

3. (SBU) Vice Minister Huong began his comments by noting that when he and Ambassador Hanford had first met, Vietnam was not designated as a CPC. Vietnam has made improvements since then, but now is being chastised as a CPC. It is frustrating to undertake these efforts and see no results. Religious believers constitute a quarter of the population of Vietnam. The number of Protestants in Vietnam at the end of the war was quite small, but it has increased to as many as 600,000 today, he stated. (Note: Other GVN officials stated there as many as one million Protestants in Vietnam. End note) This is a reflection of the GVN's policy to respect religious freedom.

4. (SBU) Vice Minister Huong alleged that much of the information that the USG uses to criticize Vietnam comes from "distorted sources" or from "radicals opposed to the GVN." Those Protestant believers whom the GVN has arrested in the Central Highlands are "terrorists and members of FULRO," and were not detained as a result of their faith. Responding to Ambassador Hanford's inquiry, Vice Minister Huong said that there was no police involvement in the 2003 death of Protestant believer Vang Seo Giao, but that Giao had drowned because he attempted to cross a river while intoxicated. Ambassador Hanford asked if Giao had drowned, why had his brother been imprisoned for his involvement in his death? Vice Minister Huong promised to provide the U.S. Embassy with the "whole file" on this case and offered to facilitate a visit by a Political Officer to investigate it further. The GVN made a positive gesture by releasing Buddhist monk Thich Tien Minh from prison on the occasion of the Tet amnesty, but immediately afterward was criticized by the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom. Much attention is given to Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang. He is not a religious prisoner, but was arrested

because he beat a police official. "I strongly believe that all the prisoners (that the USG has raised) will be free by this time next year," Huong added. Huong promised to provide the USG with the names of individuals before they are released and to notify the USG if they are to be arrested again as recidivists.

15. (SBU) Vietnam has successfully separated members of FULRO from other Protestant followers, Huong asserted. As a result, those churches in the Central Highlands that were closed because of separatist activity can be allowed to reopen. The GVN plans to assist in the registration of 36 new congregations in the Central Highlands. In some cases, the GVN will provide land for the construction of new churches, although they are doing this quietly so as not to arouse the jealousy of other religious denominations. There are currently 50 students at the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam's (SECV) seminary in Ho Chi Minh City, and "I would like this number to grow," Huong said. He added that he could envision 600 seminarians in the future.

16. (SBU) The recent Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism bans forced renunciations of faith and, further, Vietnamese law stipulates that public officials who abuse their position must provide compensation to their victims (Ref. B). Provincial authorities will accurately implement these laws, Huong promised.

17. (SBU) Vice Minister Huong claimed that Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leaders Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do have repeatedly taken hostile actions against the Government after refusing to join the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha along with the original leadership of the UBCV in 1981. "Since that time the UBCV is no longer legally protected," Huong said. Since 2000 Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do have been under no form of detention or arrest, however. If Thich Huyen Quang were to wish to visit the United States, he would be free to do so. In response to Ambassador Marine's question, Vice Minister Huong acknowledged that Thich Quang Do is under travel restrictions as he remains under investigation for possession of state secrets. This investigation continues because Thich Quang Do has been unwilling to meet with investigators to discuss the case. Vice Minister Huong alleged that "Consulate General officials" had encouraged Thich Quang Do to defy these restrictions and attempt to visit Thich Huyen Quang, saying they promised to "give him support." "I think Consulate General officials should not meet him and encourage him so much," Huong commented. Huong also promised not to take any action against the UBCV "on religious grounds."

18. (SBU) Vice Minister Huong said he is "not satisfied" by the designation of Vietnam as a CPC and added that the USG should be careful that further bilateral cooperation is not undermined by this issue. Any actions taken regarding religious believers is thanks to the standing policies of Vietnam, not because of pressure from the United States. "We have taken into consideration the U.S. - Vietnam relationship" in making these changes, however. The GVN is under pressure "from different directions" on this issue. For example, members of the National Assembly have inquired why the GVN cooperates with the USG on many issues, such as MIA recovery activities, while the USG continues to criticize the GVN. Any sanctions coming from CPC would have a "negative impact" on relations, such as "on the MIA issue." The GVN is waiting for the "good news" that the CPC issue "is over."

19. (SBU) Specifically addressing Ambassador Marine, Vice Minister Huong said that the MPS provides security to the U.S. Mission and American diplomats operating in Vietnam. There also has been a good exchange of information on counterterrorism. A successful visit by the Prime Minister to Washington may yield more results in this area. However, the Ambassador should not meet secretly with "radicals" such as Tran Khue in Ho Chi Minh City. Such actions make these individuals believe they have the support of the USG. If the USG seeks any information about these people, it should make a request to the MPS for it. The GVN also would like the USG to take action against "hostile" groups in the United States, including Kok Ksor, Vo Van Ai, Nguyen Huu Chanh and the Viet Tan party.

10. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford responded that he welcomed Vice Minister Huong's promises that all churches closed in the Central Highlands would be allowed to reopen and register as they were shown not to belong to FULRO; that certain congregations would be aided in acquiring property; that all religious prisoners would be released within the next year; and that opportunities for the training of clerics would be expanded. To rebut Huong's claim that no prisoners have been held for nearly two decades, Ambassador Hanford raised the case of Catholic Priest Nguyen Thien Phung, imprisoned since 1987. Vice Minister Huong responded that Phung had incited unrest against the local government and had even armed

himself. He is eligible for a reduction in sentence, but has continued to violate regulations while in prison and even fought against prison officials. As a result, "his education must continue."

11. (SBU) Ambassador Marine noted that cooperation on MIA recovery activities has long been a point of close cooperation between the USG and GVN. The USG would appreciate the support of the MPS in expanding its ability to carry out these types of investigation and recovery activities in the Central Highlands. The information that Consulate General officials had encouraged Thich Quang Do to break the law is incorrect. Similarly, Huong's reference to secret meetings is unclear. U.S. diplomats seek to meet

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with these individuals simply to gather information, nothing more. The FBI is investigating the activities of Nguyen Huu Chanh and would appreciate any additional information that the MPS could provide on him. If the GVN believes that the Montagnard Foundation has committed illegal activities, it should share specific details about these cases with the USG so that we can investigate the claims. Under our political system, while we cannot tell Kok Ksor that he should not criticize Vietnam, we do express our beliefs to him that his actions are not helpful.

MARINE